

# Cover Story: Culture wars

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San Antonio's cultural scene has been a big draw for visitors and sustenance for locals. But as an industry, it needs more help than is often apparent.

A recent economic impact study determined that the city's cultural and artistic activities contributed \$1.2 billion to the local economy in 2003. It found that these creative industries paid \$319 million in total wages to 11,888 employees.

The study, commissioned by the city's Office of Cultural Affairs, highlights what many local officials and artisans have known for quite a while — that the impact could and should be much greater.

But before that can happen, the local creative economy would need big financial help from both the public and private sectors, especially with the move to expand arts and cultural education, to infuse all neighborhoods with the arts and to ensure that the arts are relevant to a diverse community.

"There's a lot of history to San Antonio, and with that has come a lot of cultural and artistic ventures over the years, but to a great extent it's taken for granted," said Felix Padron, executive director of the city's Office of Cultural Affairs. "San Antonio recognizes we do have a creative city, but we have never made an investment in it."

The San Antonio City Council recently adopted the Cultural Collaborative — a 10-year plan designed to strengthen and sustain the city's cultural assets.

Implementing the plan's 38 strategies will require \$2.8 million in city funding staggered over three years, which Padron said he's hopeful the council will approve.

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"Yes, it's a significant sum of money, but it will make a huge difference in the arts and culture industry, which is so important to this city," Padron said. "Look at it this way: Seattle, which is the epitome of a cultural community, has four separate funding sources for the arts."

Though San Antonio has a multitude of generous arts patrons, Padron said, the city needs more advocates for the arts.

Private funding for the arts has declined in recent years. Foundations and corporations are strapped for discretionary funds. Also, the second and third generations of some of San Antonio's most generous philanthropists just aren't as giving.

"More people from all segments of our society need to be involved in supporting the cultural and artistic aspects of our city, which are many," Padron said. "In the end, they are creating amenities that are attractive to artists of all sorts. It's a significant contribution."

Over the years, the status of local culture and arts has become increasingly intertwined with the city's economic development efforts.

Along with questions about the quality of local schools, the dependability of the water supply and the cost of living, companies looking to relocate to San Antonio also want to know about the depth and breadth of the local culture.

"It's a quality-of-life issue," said Steve Nivin, economic development manager for the city's light-industry development division. "Our culture is intrinsic to the way we think, the way we look at life. And that is critical to an engaged and happy community."

Today's executives know they can't recruit and retain young, talented workers in a community that doesn't feed their creative needs.

Nivin talked about Rackspace, a San Antonio-based Web site hosting company, which can't keep many of its young employees long enough because they're quickly lured away by Austin's huge music scene.

Austin, the self-proclaimed "Live Music Capital of the World," has a \$600 million entertainment industry that the Austin Convention and Visitors Bureau actively promotes.

The vibrant music scene has helped Austin attract some of the most creative workers in the United States, boosting its creative economy. It's a tough act for any city to match, let alone beat.

Local officials say San Antonio could do the same by better promoting itself as a historical, cultural center.

It's a winning philosophy framed by best-selling author Richard Florida. Florida, a professor at George Mason University's School of Public Policy in Fairfax, Va., preaches that people move to a community for more than a good job. They also want a full, enriching, good life that offers them a range of arts to enjoy.

Florida says, "The three T's of economic development are technology, talent and tolerance." Major investments in all three are needed to build successful creative industries in any community.

It's got to happen for a city to remain competitive in today's global creative economy, Florida has stressed in his writings.

"Companies are attracted to San Antonio because of our talented, creative work force," Nivin said. "For economic development purposes, we need these artists here. It can make the difference between a company coming here or not coming here."

Examples of how artists are interwoven into an economy are numerous, Nivin said. Perhaps Toyota will need an artist to redesign the dashboard of Tundra truck.

"The potential for artists of all types is limitless," Padron said. "We're not just talking about poets and opera stars. The need for graphic artists already is ingrained in just about every industry you can think of. The need is here now."

Local novelist Sandra Cisneros thought she was moving to a cultural mecca when she came here from her native Chicago in 1984. She had been hired as the literary director for the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center and was yet to find her fame and fortune as a poet and novelist.

"This was a very rich scene for Latino artists at the time," Cisneros said. "And Henry (Cisneros) was here. The work he was doing was a big draw for me. And the fact that housing always has been cheaper here than anywhere else was a big incentive to stay and stay."

But over time, Cisneros' reverence for the city as an arts and cultural center has waned. When she sees lines of tourists outside the Alamo, she can't help but think of the city's extreme poverty.

"Our top priority can't be the tourists and their money. That's the wrong way to approach the value of our art," Cisneros said. "The real essence of art is that it is a necessity for the people of the community."

But she sees a major disconnect between the Latino artists and the community's power base. She bemoaned the fact that most Latino neighborhoods have no community centers or other venues where artists' work can be seen.

"All of the arts are food for our spirit, to free us from what ails us," Cisneros said. "San Antonio has such low self-esteem. We have some world-class artists here, but no great venues. The community must be willing to help its artists."

Not only is there a lack of facilities for the arts throughout the community, but according to the Cultural Collaborative plan, the viability of some of San Antonio's oldest cultural institutions is in doubt without some immediate funding.

The plan does not include a list of the facilities in need of repair and does not quantify the problem with a dollar amount. But it is well known that the Witte Museum and the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center are among the cultural facilities that are long overdue for major maintenance.

"Right now, some of our best-known and loved cultural entities are falling apart," said Ava J. Lambert, arts program coordinator for the Office of Cultural Affairs. "These institutions not only need maintenance, they need to adjust to changing times and changing demographics."

One concern among residents who have read the economic impact study is that the dollar estimate is conservative. That's because it surveyed only design and advertising, museums and collections, performing arts, schools specializing in the arts, and visual arts and photography.

The study excluded such fields as printing, publishing and broadcasting that typically are included in similar studies by other communities. Had they been included, the economic impact would have been bumped up \$2.3 billion to a total of \$3.5 billion in contributions to the local economy.

But the higher bottom line would have been a distortion, because it would have included professions that aren't considered part of the creative industry.

"We used the same methodology that we used in economic impact studies of other industries," Nivin said. "We needed to be able to match apples to apples."

The Cultural Collaborative lays out an investment blueprint for a truly creative economy for San Antonio to follow over the next 10 years.

"The plan creates a starting point, a foundation," Padron said. "If all of it is implemented, I'm convinced that San Antonio will be a very different city in 10 years."

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